

The After Battery Rat

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Pier 22

Pier 22, Destroyer and Submarine Piers... 1959.

Somewhere well before my smoke boat days... A point sometime between World War II and shooting folks into space, CE piers (old 'Convoy Escort' piers) became D&S piers (Destroyer and Submarine piers). The United States Navy does this a lot. They have this master plan... The Naval Schedule of Constant Change. Somewhere in a tarpaper shack in East Jeezus, Nebraska, there are two hundred J.G.s and a brain-dead yeoman whose sole purpose is to rename stuff so old veterans can't locate a damn thing to reignite memories.

This, coupled with municipalities initiating aggressive civic improvement programs, forces old bluejackets to wander around in areas of old ports, constantly looking at each other and saying,

"What'n the hell happened to.....? The sonuvabitch used to be right about here."

Civic improvement translates into gin mill demolition... Tearing down bars, naval tailor shops, greasy spoons, tattoo parlors, and high volume cathouses. I never figured it out... Why doesn't the term 'historic preservation' apply to structures that catered to the carnal requirements of the Second Fleet from World War I, until operating seaports went through their 'born again' transformation in the late 60's? If you went to Norfolk today, you would get the distinct impression that all we did was visit the U.S.O. and play a helluva lot of minature golf.

Old SUBRON Six lads need to pass the raghat to collect enough funds to erect a fifty foot high statue of a big busted, bleached blond in clamdigger pants two sizes too small and a white plastic pocketbook. Inscription to read,

"Hey sailor, wanna party? 35 buckos and you pay for the room..."

Cold War dollys. They were good times.

Dex Armstrong's Writings

5th in a Series of Demented Writings from DEX

From Mike Bickel:

This is the 5th contribution we've had from Dex Armstrong, aka the "After Battery Rat". I thought that as we were getting ready to have our reunion in Norfolk you all might want to get back into the Norfolk "mood".



Mike

Lads who missed the experience... Lads who never paid dues... Lads who rationalized and handbuilt self-serving perverted moral arguments against national service, are poor shortchanged bastards who must feel all alone in a voting booth... Kinda like the good men who bought their tickets on the salt water, jungle heat, high altitude, and miserable cold installment plan, slipped them a complimentary pass. I don't know about the rest of you, but when I close that curtain, it is pretty damn crowded in there... I'm in there representing a lot of good men who will reside on the bottom of the sea until the last big 'Morning Quarters' in the sky.

Pier 22... Dumpsters, fuel hoses... Telephone lines... Old busted topside watch shacks... Stacked stores awaiting assembly of a loading party. Boat sailors exchanging embellished bullshit like Bedouin traders.

"Good morning sir."

"Good morning... Exec aboard?"

"Aye sir... Dropped below 'bout 30 minutes ago."

"Did you guys have enough time to get in a full charge?"

"Aye sir."

"Stores loaded?"

"We completed loading stores from Orion at 0300... Disconnected fuel hoses 0345... Ran guard mail and picked up our traffic from the radio shack on the tender... Drew Notice to Mariners and updated charts from the squadron. Bummed ten 20-pound cans of coffee from Kittiwake and whatever rat-eaten blankets Cubera could spare."

"Ready for sea then?"

"Aye sir."

"Very well... Pass the word we'll be turning over the engines shortly, setting the maneuvering watch and singling up lines in 30 minutes."

That's how we went to work.

Pier 22 was home. If you were single with no crew, it was all the home you had. When the 'brown baggers' (khaki sackers) hauled for clean sheets, home cooking and an armload of mama, we owned 'The Pier'.

If you weren't on duty, you could wander out on the pier to catch a smoke and visit the point of informational exchange... The dumpsters. After evening chow, every messcook on every boat showed up to dump garbage.

E-3 intelligence was exchanged at this mini-oasis. In thirty minutes, you knew what boats were showing what movies, where all the card games would be held that night and the locations where night baking would take place. To the night nomads... The roaming, cross-pollinating, inter-boat hopping, non rated idiots, this was the nocturnal roadmap. It was what made diesel boats a family... It didn't matter what boat you were on, if you were SUBRON Six, you belonged. You could always count on a cup of coffee, a meal or a place to plant your worthless butt for any movie being shown on any boat alongside. In a single night, you could get the honor of being verbally abused by chief petty officers of up to a half a dozen smoke boats.

"Hey kid... Don't you sonuvabitches on Requin know where you live? How come every time I turn around, I'm up to my ass in you guys?"

"We love you chief..."

"Well, if I keep seeing your ugly faces, I'm going to put you on our watch bill and issue you a damn qual card."

For those of you who never had the pleasure of engaging in conversation with a boat service chief, this translates to,

"Welcome aboard, it is nice to have you here to share our hospitality and enjoy our gentlemenly convivial atmosphere."

When you left, these old crusty sonuvabitches would leave you with a friendly message for your Chief of the Boat.

"Tell Dutch that Red said he's ugly and his mother dresses him funny... And tell him to kiss you and tuck you in real nice."

They were okay... This was the best they could do.

Pier 22 was a piece of the United States Navy that was ours... The exclusive domain of the Dolphin mob. It was a place where a red lead spattered, unshaven, raggedy-ass boat sailor could get a cup of coffee with a hydraulic oil slick floating in it, a stale doughnut and an action-packed, horseshit loaded sea story all for the price of a handshake. It was the play yard where the submarine force held recess.

In a word, it was home.